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Part Two: Rethinking Relationships

The Cultural Aesthetics of Environment

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Introduction

Considering the environment aesthetically is a comparatively recent development. The focus on the aesthetic dimension of environment began in the 1970s and gained increasing prominence. Appearing sporadically at first, interest in environmental aesthetics developed during subsequent decades in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, and more insistently and intensively in Finland. Beginning in the 1990s, the aesthetics of environment gained a great deal of attention in China. Environmental aesthetics can now be considered an established domain of inquiry that is international in scope and that draws on and influences several disciplines. It appears most prominently in philosophical

aesthetics, environmental psychology, and landscape design, and it is a recognized focus in the visual arts, literature, and the environmental sciences.

Interest in environmental aesthetics has indeed become a global phenomenon, cutting across philosophical styles as well as cultural traditions. Much remains to be gained by continuing this momentum. Yet while we all face similar environmental problems, ways of thinking about the environment vary. Different cultural traditions, different philosophical cultures, and different conditions of life influence the way we understand experience, environment, aesthetics, ecology, and their place in life experience. There are obvious reasons for this variety. At the same time, environmental issues are no longer only regional but involve changes whose effects spread without limit atmospherically as well as geographically. There are compelling reasons, therefore, to consider whether there is any commonality on which these differences can converge.

Common problems invite coordinated solutions. It would greatly assist cooperative action on environmental issues if we shared a similar understanding of the ideas that are central to this situation. Encouraging as the global interest in environment may be, it is nonetheless the case that research on the aesthetics of environment displays significant differences in the meaning of its central ideas. It may therefore help reduce the inconsistencies and confusion in what is meant by the key concepts by clarifying their meanings. In such a spirit, I should like to offer some reflections on how we might bring together the sometimes disjointed thinking on the underlying issues.

It seems obvious that any inquiry should begin with a clear understanding of the basic concepts involved. This may seem obvious but it is not easy to do for, as is well known, our concepts are so embedded in historical uses and cultural matrices

that ideas that seem intuitively simple and unambiguous may well embody confusion and even contradiction. As an interest in environmental aesthetics has grown beyond the attention of a few widely scattered scholars to enter into national and international discussion, problems with clarity and difficulties in communication have become increasingly troublesome. A comprehensive analysis of terminology would be a worthwhile undertaking, but it is not possible in a brief chapter to offer more than one perspective on this. For the purposes of the present discussion, let me present approximations of our foundational concepts that may provide a common place of reference if not a common ground.

Words about Environment

Let me begin with the observation that no concept in philosophy is self-evident, simple, or self-contained. Every basic idea is unavoidably caught in a network of theoretical assumptions and implications. Any apparent obviousness belies these hidden debts and allegiances. Culture and theory thus combine to oblige us to begin with complexity. There are no simples in philosophy. This is clearly the case with the three basic ideas that inform our discussion: environment, aesthetics, and ecology.

Environment

It might seem obvious to consider *environment* the foundational idea of this inquiry. Surely it is the overall focus of our concern. It is commonplace to speak these days of an environmental crisis, and this is not only a manner of speaking. People across the globe are increasingly distressed by erratic and unseemly weather events: disrupted seasonal changes, freak wind storms, record floods, and tidal

waves, not to mention more anticipated if not welcomed environmental disturbances like hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes. Added to these so-called natural disasters are those caused by human action and error. I am inclined to think, however, that rather than beginning with an understanding of environment, the discussion might better terminate in an enlarged sense of environment. That is, our confrontation with environmental issues, such as weather and climate change, is a result of the consequences of people's attitudes and practices and not because of any conceptual order. As one of the leading ideas, environment invites a larger, more inclusive understanding than climatological changes and crises.

Yet the very breadth of environmental concerns makes a clear focus difficult. Environment embraces many regions and perspectives: preservation, conservation, resource protection and use, land use and planning, public policy, recreation, and enjoyment, to name some of the most obvious. All are relevant and all are important, but the concern here is with a clearer understanding of environment and its issues. Perhaps it would serve to focus on an *aesthetic* interest in environment as fundamental. In some sense, it *is* fundamental because our *sensory* engagement with environment precedes and underlies every other interest. I say this because sensory perception lies at the heart of the meaning of aesthetics and is central in aesthetic experience, and the sensible experience of environment stands at the center of every other environmental interest and use.

Aesthetics

It might seem, then, that since our concern here is with aesthetics, that is, environmental aesthetics, *aesthetics* should be our point of departure. Whether we

take aesthetics here in a fairly narrow sense to mean the beauty of environment or consider it broadly as sensible experience in general, that is, as the range of sensory perception, aesthetics is necessarily a central point at which environmental concerns intersect human experience and activity. We might even claim that the aesthetic should not only be our starting point but is also our ultimate end as the fundamental understanding of direct perceptual experience.

These two ideas, environment and aesthetics, are clearly at the heart of this inquiry. But there is a third: *ecology*. This may seem like a late addition to the discussion; and as I noted earlier, ecology has only more recently assumed an important place in our understanding of environment. Indeed, as a region of scientific theory and investigation, ecology emerged only in the late nineteenth century. And while it began as a biological theory about the interdependence of organisms in particular environments considered as ecosystems, its basic concept has spread throughout the social as well as natural sciences.

Ecology

Ecology may seem to be derivative, a way of thinking about environment that has only secondary interest here, and until recently ecological concerns have not had a prominent place in environmental aesthetics. Indeed, ecology figures most prominently in discussions of environmental aesthetics by Chinese researchers. Is this a cultural difference or does it entail a theoretical divergence?

Reviewing the theoretical underpinning of an aesthetics of environment, one may conclude that ecology can make a significant, indeed a determinative, contribution. By starting with an ecological orientation, we gain an illuminating perspective on this inquiry, for an ecological outlook transfigures our understanding

of both environment and aesthetics. In fact, ecological aesthetics can serve as the leading idea here, an idea whose meaning decides all that follows. Let us see how that is.

An ecological perspective considers environment as a system of interacting, interdependent participating factors. Environment then becomes a complex whole. Because of this interdependence, an ecosystem is not the sum of independent parts or organisms. Rather it is an unstable complex in precarious balance striving to sustain its coherence. I use the word "complex" rather than "whole" because the coherence of an ecosystem is the outcome of a dynamic process involving a multitude of organisms, objects, factors, and conditions. It may achieve balance but that is as a complex, never a unity. We can think of an ecosystem, then, as a context rather than a thing or an object.[1]

Considering environment from an ecological perspective transforms our understanding. It leads to discarding the common meaning of environment as surroundings in favor of re-envisioning it as an all-inclusive whole, embracing humans, when present, together with other living organisms and the physical conditions with which they live, including geographical features and climate. Because ecology envisions these as interconnected, it is necessary to think of the constituents of environment as all-inclusive and continuous. In this sense, environment is holistic: nothing outside, nothing apart. It is clear from the conception of ecology that there are ethical as well as aesthetic implications: An ecological aesthetics is inseparable from an ecological ethics.[2]

Humans, then, should be understood as participating parts of their context, understood and experienced from within. From the human standpoint, in relation to people's lives, environment becomes experience. Thinking ecologically,

environment must be understood as *contextual* experience. Aesthetics fastens on the sensible aspects of that experience, and so environment, considered aesthetically, is perceptual. Thus the language of environmental aesthetics brings us to the idea of *experience*, for our understanding of experience is fundamental to everything we say about environment.

The Matrix of Experience

Experience has been an important idea in the history of philosophic thought, beginning with the pre-Socratics and extending to the very present. Generally considered synecdochically as sense experience, its transitoriness and ephemerality have troubled philosophers in their search for coherence, regularity, and stability. Thus a dialectic developed around change in favor of permanence, denigrating change as unworthy and destructive of human good in comparison with the ideal of absolute permanence, of things *sub specie aeternitatis.* Experience has a history that runs the length of philosophic time, yet, oddly enough, the history of experience remains to be written. In our present discussion, understanding experience is basic to understanding environment.

Starting with experience may seem a strange way to pursue a discussion of environment. Environment, of course, is usually thought of in a scientific or quasi-scientific, objective sense as *the* environment, a definable subject-matter, something to be studied by various branches of physical science, such as physical geography, climatology, and ecology. These identify environment objectively, as an object, but it is an object that becomes more personal when we ponder the effects of global warming, since all living creatures, humans included, are affected by climate change and its consequences. These affect the habitability of various

regions of the earth's surface, they influence agriculture and food production, and they force us to cope with the effects of changing temperature gradients and new and more extreme weather patterns. It is convenient when considering global climate change to externalize environment, to speak of *the* environment as if environment were something apart from ourselves about which we are concerned.

But this, I think, offers only a partial and misleading understanding. It is partial because it fragments environment by circumscribing and objectifying environmental experience, abstracting it into separate parts, and treating problems as isolated events requiring specific, local solutions. It is misleading because, by regarding these abstractions as if they were real and objective, it takes a derivative understanding as if it were the basic one. The lesson of ecology is that, in relation to human needs and human uses, there is no environment out there apart from and distinct from us.[3] This leads us to recognize that the fundamental meaning of environment is its human meaning, more pointedly, its meaning in experience. And environment is not experienced objectively but always here with us, where we are. By beginning with experience, then, we begin with ourselves, with the human world of which we are an integral part. And when we come to speak of environment, then, it only falsifies things to think that we can objectify environment and consider it independently of human place, participation, and use.

The intent here has been to offer an orderly progression of the leading ideas of environmental aesthetics. Oddly enough, what has emerged is actually two orders. We began with environment, turned next to discuss aesthetics, and followed with ecology. And we concluded by interpreting all within the matrix of experience. This is a logical order: with environment as the broadest concept, which we then

combine with aesthetics, and arrive at a special sense of environmental aesthetics as ecological.

The Logical Order of Environmental Aesthetics

environment

aesthetics

environmental aesthetics

ecological aesthetics

There is another order, however, one that is truer to experience. Indeed, when we cast our ideas in the language of experience, the order becomes inverted. For starting with experience, all experience is actually contextual and so can be understood ecologically. And as experience is primarily perceptual, it is always aesthetic. Finally, taken most broadly, we come to understand the idea of environment as ecological aesthetics. From this line of reasoning, then, the aesthetics of environment is ecological.

The Experiential Order of Environmental Aesthetics

ecology

aesthetics as sensibility (perception)

environment as ecological aesthetics

Our choice is the language of experience, beginning with a commitment to the largest perceptual context, one that the concept of ecology reflects most adequately. This, as we have seen, is not the biological setting alone nor the physical conditions of environment only. Since our reference is to experience, the

human perceiver is central, and the condition that binds together all aspects of the context is perceptual experience. When central, such experience is thus aesthetic, and the aesthetic becomes the primary mode of experience. For these reasons, then, environmental aesthetics can be considered ecological aesthetics, and this implies a cultural ecology.

Environmental aesthetics thus translates ecology into experience; it is the human meaning of ecology. This is another way of saying that the concept of ecology is of an environment understood as a complex of interdependent objects and factors. The scope of such an environment is defined by the activity and intensity of such interdependence. As its force begins to fade and other factors become prominent, a different ecosystem begins to emerge. Such boundaries are rarely sharp, but distinctions are nonetheless possible as, for example, between an urban ecosystem and a suburban one or between the city and the countryside. Mountains and valleys are distinguishable even though their precise boundaries cannot be plotted.

The aesthetic experience of environment is thus the perceptual counterpart of ecology. Environmental aesthetics embodies the ecological meaning of environment. It has profound implications for environmental understanding and design and thus for ecological aesthetics.[4] Ecology in this sense requires constant reference to aesthetic experience as a guide and a criterion in environmental design. The work of many environmental artists is important in pointing up the experiential aspect of environments, that is the awareness that environments do not consist of objects but of experiential relationships. Pioneer work is being done in integrating an aesthetic dimension in ecologically oriented environmental design, and such work is significant for both environmental and ecological aesthetics.[5]

Ecology and Culture

The interplay of humans within the natural world is experienced and understood in sharply different ways in Western and Eastern cultures. An observation such as this would seem to force us into broad and overpowering generalities, and this is invariably misleading when joined with a commitment to the diversity and particularity of experience. Still, recognizing the dangers should not prevent us from recognizing common patterns, despite differences that exist among the many writers and movements that reflect them. And these patterns are revealing.

A full historical analysis would undoubtedly display a richly varied tapestry describing the human world. And a nuanced commentary would reflect their intermingling and divergent strands. But at the same time, and for our purposes here, it is important that this variety and complexity not obscure the broad patterns that emerge. It is these that stand as a potent illustration of the cultural influences on experience. In its bold outline, the characteristic patterns by which experience is understood in Western cultures display a sense of separation of humans from the natural world. Eastern cultures, in contrast, reflect the an understanding of the harmonious integration of nature and humans.

Both opposing views have ancient origins. The Western understanding is embodied in early texts that have had a powerful influence. The two most influential intellectual sources are works written down at approximately the same time, i.e. the fourth century B.C.E., and largely middle Eastern in origin. One justifies taking possession of the natural world for human purposes; the other denigrates sensory experience. The first is the Hebrew *Bible*, which establishes a justification

for humans appropriating the creatures, objects, and resources of nature for their own interests and uses.[6] The other is Platonic philosophy that ascribes to natural objects a lowly status in the order of things and posits a higher reality that is the refuge of truth and reality itself, an understanding found throughout Plato's dialogues and most famously in *The Republic*.[7] Whitehead's comment that Western civilization is a footnote to Plato testifies to its effect.

These influences have combined to shape the Western view of the natural environment. "Environment" is an idea we have devised to identify our material matrix, commonly defined as "surroundings" in Western languages, giving linguistic credibility to a way of thinking endemic in Western culture.[8] It reflects a tradition that we can trace to the religious beliefs and practices of ancient Greek Orphism that separated the physical world from what is distinctively human.[9] It was an understanding that appeared in various forms during the Golden Age of classic Greek philosophy and continued in religious and philosophical formulations to emerge in the Enlightenment in Descartes' dualistic objectification of the physical world as the full rational reconstruction of human experience.

This historico-cultural development of Western civilization led to understanding the world as an objective condition separate from and independent of humans, and it turned environment into an object for humans to control and manipulate. Thus we speak easily about the relation of person and environment, as if they were two distinct things that can be causally connected. Such a conception fits easily with the growth of early modern science and the technological revolution it generated. This was a development that quickly altered the human environment and led, among much else, to the environment-transforming practices that have reached a crisis level in our time.

In their rapid industrialization, Eastern countries—such as China, Japan, and India—have compressed Western development into a few short generations, resulting in many of the same environmental problems that the West is confronting. At the same time, the cultural historical influences in Eastern cultures provide the basis for a very different conception of environment that is struggling to assert itself against short-term economic and political interests. Common to the many different strains of Daoism is an understanding grounded in the view of living in harmony with nature. Eastern culture here offers a remarkable parallel with recent Western ecological thought, for it is a way of thinking that we can describe as ecological in character. Of course, the first is a religio-cultural understanding and the other a scientific one. But what is relevant here is not their differing sources but their similar understanding. While originating as a biological theory, ecology offers a compelling theoretical framework that has not only shown its value in the social sciences but has special relevance for the environmental sciences and for environmental philosophy.

What ecology offers is an understanding of environment as an integral whole. Environment thus does not consist of a relation between humans and their environment as distinct and separate entities. Environment rather *includes* the human as an interdependent and engaged constituent. One of the most important lessons we can draw from ecology is that there is no environment apart from and distinct from humans.[10] Humans and environment need to be understood as interdependent constituents of a complex whole that has identifiable contributing factors but not separate parts. This is a way of thinking about the world, and it may help explain the attraction of ecological aesthetics for Chinese environmental aestheticians.[11]

It is interesting to consider whether this cultural matrix is simply an alternative world view. That would imply a cultural relativism in which the differences are essentially arbitrary. However, there are more or less accurate ways of representing environment, and we can claim that an ecological model better reflects our present knowledge of environment, whether understood in a physicalistic, scientific sense, in an experiential one, or philosophically. This does not imply an "objective," absolute truth but rather a less assumptive understanding that shares the compelling, evidentiary claims of science. The conception of environment as ecological affirms its meaning as a human meaning, its meaning as experienced. As experienced, environment does not stand apart but is always related to humans, to the human world of interest, activity, and use. That is the human meaning of ecology.

On the subject of experience, we encounter a great body of thought. From the physical and social sciences to the literary arts and philosophy, one can consider human experience the most inclusive subject of inquiry. This discussion of environmental aesthetics offers but an endnote to that research. Perhaps, rather than an endnote, it is more of a searchlight that may be directed over the range of scientific and scholarly commentary, since it centers on understanding that experience on which all other inquiry rests.

At the risk of affirming the obvious, it will be useful to call attention to some characteristics of experience that are easily overlooked. The categories into which we pour the molten intangibilities of experience are so engrained in habitual thinking that we are likely to assume them as ontological rather than customary: categories such as emotions, sensations, thoughts, memories, ideas, feelings, imagination, consciousness, cognition, perception, and more. The challenge is how

to make the ephemeral tangible, and these categories have long served as convenient receptacles. But like the proverbial emperor's new clothes, though we persist in thinking we see those categories as something (i.e., as ontological), there is nothing there. Moreover, taken alone, whatever meaning content such categories have is informed and constrained by the habits of so-called "common sense," heavily clouded by the multitude of influences that give them conceptual shape and content. Think of the many meanings given to "perception" and of the severely limited vocabulary with which we identify emotions, as well as the metaphors with which we attempt to grasp consciousness, from James's "stream" to Locke's atomistic theory of substance and his corpuscular theory of mind.

Thus there are multiple "overlays" through which we discern and interpret experience. One obvious overlay is cultural, expressed through our natal language, traditional practices, prevalent beliefs, and systems of belief, all infused with regional geographical and climatological conditions as their context of reference. To this cultural overlay must be added a historical one. Our understanding is subtly and not so subtly influenced by our historical circumstances: the notable events and conditions of the time, in addition to their influence on the cultural climate. We can identify still other overlays of differing scope, such as professional, avocational, social, and educational, along with the more transitory influences of taste, style, fads, and fashionable ideologies. All of these, moreover, are themselves categories through which we isolate and identify dimensions and perspectives of experience. These observations on the multiple matrices of experience are not intended to obfuscate our attempts at illuminating it. Rather they begin to make more explicit the multidimensional landscape of experience and lead us to recognize the conditions under which we attempt to grasp the human world.

What, one might ask, do these general comments have to do with the aesthetics of environment and how we think and talk about it? In one respect, merely to ask the question is to answer it, for environment is a fundamental category of experience through which we organize our understanding and identify the issues. It is important, however, to make these observations more definite by identifying basic cultural differences in understanding environment, recognizing all the while that large trends mask many variations. These differences, deeply historical and cultural, characterize differing relations of nature and humans that are fundamental in Western and Eastern thought.

Whether a resolution of this divergence is possible is a difficult question. The answer will not lie in a choice between simple alternatives but requires determinations that are circumstantial and may be complex. Satisfactory resolutions must be decided in relation to the specific context and to the particular points of balance between the options that are available. These will vary with scientific, poetic, and political environments and will reflect the order of values chosen, itself a cultural determination. Is it possible to attain equipoise between the technological capabilities of Western cultures and the cosmic proportionality of the Eastern? The answer to this rests with whether the social and political development of human civilization has attained the capacity for such a resolution.

Conclusion

This rich array of ideas does not allow for a simple summary. We have tried to reshape the issues so that the relationships between conceptual understanding (ecological aesthetics) and perceptual experience (environmental aesthetics) become clearer. It is important to realize that the former must be seen in the light

of the latter. When we recognize that ideas originate in perception and should be translated back into experience, we can then proceed to reshape our world in ways that better meet our interests and fulfill our needs. The possibilities are there, often hidden in a miasma of false constructions and misty assumptions. The question remains whether we will be able to find our way through them clearly enough to survive and prosper.

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[1] See Justus Buchler, *The Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966); 2nd ed. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990).

[2] Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), develops the implications of ecological thinking for philosophic rationality and ethics. The same cultural and natural embeddedness that affects our understanding of environmental aesthetics influences profoundly our understanding of environmental justice.

[3] See especially Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

[4] Cheng Xiangzhan offers an account of the influence of my work in environmental aesthetics on the development of ecological aesthetics in China. See Cheng Xiangzhan, "Environmental Aesthetics and Ecological Aesthetics: Arnold Berleant's Impact on Ecological Aesthetics in China," *Sztuka i Filosofia* 37 (2011): 24–35 (in Polish).

[5] Such work is widely scattered and is international in scope. Three environmental designers whose work combines ecological and aesthetic concerns are the American Patricia Johanson, the Brazilian Fernando Chacel, and the Chinese Yu Kongjian.

[6] *Genesis* 1:28-29.

[7] Plato, *The Republic* V, 475–480; VI–VII.

[8] For example, the German *Umwelt*; the French *environs.*

[9] The Orphic ideas have been traced to the fourth century B.C.E. but are likely even older. Relevant here is its mythology in which Zeus designates his illegitimate child Dionysus as his heir. His wife, Hera, incites the Titans to murder and eat Dionysus, but Zeus, when he learns of this, incinerates the Titans with a thunderbolt. Mankind is born from the ashes, which contain the bodies of the Titans and Dionysus, resulting in humans having a divine soul (Dionysus) and a body (the Titans) to which the soul is in bondage.

[10] See especially Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment.*

[11] Zeng Fanren, in particular, has developed the conception of an ecological environmental aesthetic. See Zeng Fanren, "A Conception of Ecological Aesthetics in the Perspective of Today's Ecological Civilization," *Literary Review* 4 (2005); Zeng Fanren, "A Review on the Relationship between Ecological Aesthetics and Environmental Aesthetics," *Exploration and Free Views* 9 (2008). See also Zeng Fanren, *Collected Articles on Aesthetics of Ecological Existence*, 2nd ed. (Changchun: Jilin People's Press, 2003), revised and enlarged in 2009.